

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY BERLIN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6906
INFO AMEMBASSY WARSAW
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST
AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMCONSUL MUNICH
AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
AMEMBASSY SOFIA
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E.O.11652: N/A
TAGS: PGOV, GE
SUBJECT: SED AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP MEET PUBLICLY
FOR FIRST TIME

1. MONDAY, MARCH 6, WITNESSED THE FIRST MEETING
BETWEEN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE SED AND THE LEADERSHIP
OF THE EAST GERMAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH. THE PROMINENT
TOPICS OF DISCUSSION, ACCORDING TO NEUES DEUTSCHLAND,
WERE INCREASED USE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING FOR
CHURCH PURPOSES AND EXPANDED PASTORAL ACTIVITIES IN
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PRISONS.

2. THE CHURCH GROUP WAS HEADED BY BISHOP ALBRECHT
SCHOENHERR OF BERLIN, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE FEDERATION
OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN THE GDR, WHICH
COMPRISES THE EIGHT EAST GERMAN EVANGELICAL AND
EVANGELICAL-LUTHERAN "LANDESKIRCHE." SCHOENHERR,

RECENTLY ELECTED TO A NEW SIX-YEAR TERM AS CHAIRMAN, HAS BEEN THE CHIEF ARCHITECT OF THE CHURCH'S POLICY OF ACCOMMODATION WITH THE STATE AND SED IN RECENT YEARS AND THE PRINCIPAL SPOKESMAN FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE ROLE OF "CHRISTIANS IN SOCIALISM," THE THEORY THAT CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIALISM SHARE COMMON ALTRUISTIC GOALS AND THAT THE CHURCH SHOULD NOT PLAY AN ADVERSARY ROLE TO THE STATE IN A SOCIALIST SOCIETY. ALSO ATTENDING WAS SCHOENHERR'S DEPUTY, BISHOP WERNER KRUSCHE OF MAGEDBURG, WHO HAS BEEN OUTSPOKENLY CRITICAL OF THE TREATMENT OF THE CHURCH IN THE GDR IN RECENT MONTHS, FOCUSING IN PARTICULAR ON THE TOPICS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND PRESSURE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOLS AND BY OFFICIAL YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS TO KEEP THEM OUT OF THE CHURCH. ACCOMPANYING HONECKER WERE POLITBURO MEMBER PAUL VERNER, RUDI BELLMANN THE HEAD OF THE SED "WORKING GROUP FOR CHURCH QUESTIONS" AND OTHERS.

3. CHURCH-SPONSORED OR RELATED BROADCASTS ARE NOT PERMITTED ON EAST GERMAN TELEVISION; RADIO BROADCASTS ARE LIMITED TO A FEW HOURS ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. AN EASING OF THESE RESTRICTIONS HAS LONG BEEN AN IMPORTANT CHURCH GOAL. THERE IS NO INDICATION THAT THE MEETING WITH THE SED LEADERS HAS IN ANY WAY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RESOLVED THIS QUESTION, BUT THE WILLINGNESS OF THE PARTY REPRESENTATIVES EVEN TO LISTEN ON THIS TOPIC IS SOMETHING OF A CONCESSION. CHURCH ACTIVITIES IN PRISONS ARE CURRENTLY HIGHLY CIRCUMSCRIBED, THE CHURCH FREQUENTLY NOT EVEN BEING ABLE TO HAVE REGULAR CONTACT WITH PASTORS AND OTHER CHURCH MEMBERS WHO HAVE BEEN IMPRISONED FOR POLITICAL REASONS. HOWEVER, IT APPEARS THAT THE DISCUSSION WITH HONECKER WAS LIMITED TO THE BROADER QUESTION OF THE FUTURE OF PASTORAL SERVICES TO PRISONERS IN GENERAL.

4. NEWS REPORTS ON THE MEETING DOMINATED THE FRONT PAGES OF ALL BERLIN DAILIES MARCH 7. THEY QUOTED HONECKER AS AFFIRMING "THE POSITIVE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN SOCIALISM FOR PEACE AND HUMANITY." HE RESTATED THE OFFICIAL POSITION THAT ALL EAST GERMANS ENJOY COMPLETE FREEDOM OF BELIEF WITHOUT ANY INTERFERENCE BY THE STATE (A CLAIM DISPUTED IN PRINT IN THE FRG BY BISHOP KRUSCHE IN RECENT MONTHS). SCHOENHERR IS REPORTED TO HAVE PRAISED IMPROVEMENTS IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN THE GDR AND TO HAVE PAID TRIBUTE TO THE HELSINKI

CONFERENCE AS A "SIGN OF HOPE." HOWEVER, HE
MANAGED TO COVER DEFTLY BOTH SIDES OF THE STREAM BY
DECLARING THAT THE CHURCH IN THE GDR "HOPES WITH ALL
ITS STRENGTH THAT THE HIGHEST GOALS OF SECURITY AND
GUARANTEEING OF HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL AS PART OF THE
SECURING OF PEACE CAN BE REALIZED STEP BY STEP
BEYOND BELGRADE."

5. AT A RECENT DINNER AT THE RESIDENCE ON
MARCH 3, GERALD GOETTING, CHAIRMAN OF THE EASTERN
CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION, TOLD THE AMBASSADOR
THAT HONECKER'S AGREEMENT TO MEET WITH CHURCH

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LEADERS REPRESENTED A BREAK-THROUGH. HE CLAIMED
SOME CREDIT FOR ARRANGING THIS GENERAL DISCUSSION
BETWEEN CHURCH LEADERS AND SED LEADERSHIP. IN THE
SAME CONTEXT GOETTING DECLARED HIS INTEREST
IN VISITING THE US TO ENGAGE IN DISCUSSIONS WITH
VARIOUS GROUPS THERE ON THE GDR AND US-GDR RELATIONS.

HOWEVER, IN ANSWER TO A QUESTION, HE STATED THAT HE HAS NO SPECIFIC INVITATION FROM AN AMERICAN GROUP. GOETTING ADDED THAT HE HAD MET MARTIN LUTHER KING AND MRS. MONDALE AND WAS IN CONTACT WITH SEVERAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE US.
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6. COMMENT; THIS UNPRECEDENTED PUBLIC MEETING OF CHURCH AND PARTY LEADERS, AND THE CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION GIVEN TO IT BY THE EAST GERMAN MEDIA, ARE THE PRODUCT OF THE GRADUAL THAW WHICH HAS TAKEN PLACE IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN THE HONECKER ERA. THE MEETING IS HOWEVER SOMETHING OF A CONCESSION BY BOTH SIDES. FOR THE CHURCH IT IS A SIGNIFICANT DEPARTURE FROM ITS TRADITIONALLY ARMS-LENGTH POSTURE TOWARDS THE STATE AND PARTY APPARATUS, A POSTURE WHICH HAS BEEN GRADUALLY MODIFIED UNDER SCHOENHERR'S LEADERSHIP. FOR THE SED IT IS AN OPEN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE IMPORTANT ROLE WHICH THE CHURCH PLAYS IN EAST GERMAN SOCIETY AND AN INDICATION TO THE POPULATION THAT THE SED HAS DECIDED TO CONTINUE ITS MODUS VIVENDI WITH THE ONLY ORGANIZED INSTITUTION IN THE COUNTRY OUTSIDE OF THE PARTY AND STATE MONOPOLY. FOR MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH AND MEMBERS OF THE SED, THEREFORE, THIS MEETING IS OF CONSIDERABLE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE.

7. IN PRACTICAL TERMS, WE SEE THE MEETING AS PART OF A CONTINUING LONG-TERM TREND IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS. THE APPARENT THAW IS CONSISTENT WITH OUR INTEREST IN INTERNAL LIBERALIZATION AND SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED THROUGH EXCHANGE OF VISITS AND OTHER MEANS. MORE DETAILED BACKGROUND AND EMBASSY VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE GDR WILL FOLLOW IN A SEPARATE MESSAGE. END COMMENT.
BOLEN

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